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...radio-eavesdropping—and the electronic machine that the security workers fear...

DOES THE LIE-DETECTOR HAVE THE RING OF TRUTH?

By DAVID ROSENBERG and DAVID SHEARS

OPPOSITION by workers at Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), Cheltenham, to the introduction of lie-detector tests is one important factor behind the Government's ban on trade union membership there.

Britain purchased six polygraphs — lie-detectors — last October through her embassy in Washington, from a company called Stoelting, in Chicago, at a total cost of over £18,000. Two MI5 men were trained in their use and interpretation at CIA headquarters near Washington.

Lie-detector tests have already started on security officers in MI5 and MI6. A so-called "pilot scheme", will begin at Cheltenham in early April, testing at random a cross-section of staff from probationers to seasoned operatives, all due for their five-yearly positive vetting review. Polygraphs are expected to become fully operational at Cheltenham by the end of this year.

Many Cheltenham staff see the Government's offer of £1,000 to buy out their trade-union rights as, rather, an attempt to buy their silence over the polygraph. "We have no doubt that the polygraph is absolutely central to the union ban," said Ken Jones, of the Society of Civil and Public Servants. "It is a clumsy pre-emptive strike to de-fuse a row that would have embarrassed the Government badly in American eyes."

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Unions at GCHQ have been preparing a full-scale campaign against lie-detector tests. Security chiefs were alarmed at the prospect of employees going to industrial tribunals if they were sacked either for refusing to take the test or because the results made them suspect.

Far from taking the heat out of the issue, the Government's handling of the ban has highlighted widespread misgivings about the polygraph.

The pilot scheme was recommended by the Security Commission after its investigation into the case of Geoffrey Prime, jailed for 35 years in November, 1982, for selling secrets to the Soviet Union. Mrs Thatcher came under pressure from the United States to give the polygraph priority. The CIA was horrified at the leakage of classified material from Cheltenham to the Russians.

It was feared that the special intelligence relationship between the two countries, including the sharing of material between GCHQ and America's National Security Agency, could be jeopardised if lie-detectors were not used.

"Did you shoot Fred?": Jeremy Barrett, managing director of Polygraph Security Services, and his assistant, Robina Crawshaw, demonstrate the polygraph

Opinions of the polygraph from clinical psychologists I canvassed last week varied from "wholly untrustworthy" to "the most important investigative device since fingerprinting." British security chiefs view the polygraph as an ancillary device in positive vetting procedures, not as a panacea.

The polygraph has four long, thin pens, which are attached to highly sensitive instruments measuring breathing, pulse rate and skin moisture. A belt is placed around the subject's chest to monitor respiration, a blood pressure cuff goes around the arm, while electrodes round the first and middle fingers measure sweating.

The readings are transferred electronically and trace wavering lines on a moving belt of graph paper. Operators are trained to interpret significant variations in these lines while the subject is being questioned. The theory is to measure physical reaction to three types of questioning: relevant ("Did you shoot Fred?"), irrelevant ("Is your name John Smith?"), and "control"—questions designed to evoke guilt even among innocent subjects ("Have you ever fiddled an expense account?").

If the physical reaction to the relevant question—the key issue—is less than the response to a control question, then the subject is likely to be innocent. His denial of culpability in what is the subject of the investigation may be believed, and vice versa. This is the theory.

The 1,500-strong American Polygraphers' Association claims up to 95 per cent accuracy. An experienced polygraph operator will usually spot physical attempts to fool the detector, like biting the tongue or putting a drawing pin in one's shoe.

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But there have been more serious criticisms by both Government officials and academics in America about the effectiveness of the polygraph. Mental techniques like self-hypnosis, yoga-type meditation or simply focusing thoughts elsewhere are all viable defences, they say, many of them already well cultivated by the KGB.

Professor David Lykken, of the University of Minnesota, calls the questioning technique "asinine — biased against a truthful person." He added: "It is dangerous and counter-productive, and wrong at least a third of the time. It is a menace to be suppressed."

And Dr John Beary, US Assistant Secretary of Defence for Health, said in a Pentagon memorandum: "The polygraph does not work. . . . It is an excitement detector not a lie-detector."

These reservations have been taken up eagerly by the Civil Service unions in Britain. They claim that the polygraph pinpoints barely 75 per cent of those who lie and wrongly identifies 50 per cent of innocent subjects as deceptive. Ken Jones of the SCPS says: "Many valuable civil servants will have their careers destroyed by a thoroughly discredited and unreliable technique."

The unions, which are determined to continue to resist the polygraph, are supported by Cheltenham's Conservative MP, Mr Charles Irving: "The polygraph has a record of proven failure. The trained infiltrator will get round the test."

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